

UWLP Releases New Research on Gender-Specific Barriers to Educational Attainment

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In 2023, Envision Utah collected responses from nearly 2,000 students regarding their perceptions of higher education. The students, who were at least 13 years old, in high school, or recently graduated, shared their perspectives on their plans for and perceptions of barriers to attaining an education.

The Utah State University [Utah Women & Leadership Project](#) (UWLP) recently published a research brief analyzing the data. The report aims to provide insight into students' perspectives so that potential solutions are data-driven.

"We have an opportunity to provide targeted support depending on student perceptions," said Susan Madsen, Karen Haight Huntsman Endowed Professor of Leadership in the [USU Jon M. Huntsman School of Business](#) and founder/director of the UWLP. "There is so much that is actionable from this research brief, and the reality is that parents, community members, religious leaders, teachers, and school personnel can start today by expressing support to young women. They can share information about opportunities for educational attainment – including how to pay for it – and chip away at the barriers that create doubt in their minds."

Utah's female secondary school students are ambitious about their plans for educational attainment. In fact, 67.1% of young women responded they would attend a four-

year college (compared to 63.2% of young men). Of those who planned to pursue more education or training, 69% of young women planned to start right away. In contrast, 42.2% of young men were more likely to delay educational pursuits until after completion of a religious mission (compared to 12.2% of young women).

Students identified tuition, cost of living, cost of books, mental health, the need to work, and what to study as challenges. As the 2022 report noted, females continue to have more significant concerns about these topics than their male counterparts.

Financial barriers remain the top concern among young women and men in Utah, with young women being significantly more concerned about paying for tuition, living expenses, and course materials. This concern is not unfounded. In Utah, the gender wage gap remains the worst in the U.S., with women earning 73 cents for every dollar made by men.

"This disparity reinforces concerns among women that the cost of college may not yield sufficient financial returns," said Matthew D. Meng, an associate professor of marketing in the [USU Jon M. Huntsman School of Business](#), and author of the research brief. "Generally, as educational attainment increases, unemployment rates decrease, and incomes increase; the fact that women do not experience this at the same rate as men is lamentable."

Among the identified barriers, mental health showed the greatest difference between males and females. Female students expressed greater concern about feeling a sense of belonging in higher education communities. And, because female students report greater numbers of safety-related issues – such as bullying, sexual harassment/assault, or a combination – their concern about feeling they belong in new environments is understandable.

The research also found that Utah female students have different expectations than male students. Females expect to become a well-rounded person, understand the world better, and learn about topics that interest them. Male students report more career-related expectations and, surprisingly, were more likely to report that they would expect to find a spouse/partner as part of their higher educational experience.

"Lack of educational attainment can have lifelong detrimental effects," Meng said. "To have the greatest influence, it is important to take proactive steps to empower Utah's students early, and we must understand

the issues they face if we are going to implement effective solutions.”

The report offers the following recommendations to decrease barriers for Utah female students:

1. **Enhancing financial support:** Additional financial support is crucial, and efforts to develop and expand scholarship programs and partnerships should continue. Addressing the gender pay gap may help more women justify an investment in education.
2. **Improving information accessibility:** Students need better information about applications, financial aid, and career planning. Promoting higher education opportunities and career fields is critical.
3. **Supporting mental health:** In addition to expanding resources to support students’ mental health, measures to address underlying causes of mental health issues – including promoting supportive environments – should be a high priority.
4. **Increasing representativeness:** Efforts to recruit, hire, and retain faculty and staff that reflect the broader population will benefit each of Utah’s higher education institutions.

“A cultural shift led by community and religious leaders at the highest levels in Utah is likely required,” Meng said, and he is optimistic. “By promoting a more forward-thinking narrative around gender equality, influential figures can encourage families to increase education prioritization for their daughters, help close the educational attainment gap in the long term, and inspire broader societal change.”

[Click here](#) to read the full report. For more information, visit the UWLP website at utwomen.org.

A Bolder Way Forward includes “higher educational attainment” as one area of focus. Learn more [here](#).

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